

# ***Dalriada***

*A collection of verse and prose  
based on the area and historical setting  
of Dalriada*

*All poems  
and photography  
by  
Lee H Smith © 2009*

*A leaflet detailing notes  
about the poems is available  
free of charge by email.*

## DUNADD

Bare grey rock,  
darkened by night,  
cold to the touch.

Feet sink into peaty soil,  
boggy grass squelching  
brown rivers  
over the boots.

Gasping the  
thin wet air,  
mists of time  
eddy about the summit.

I really *am* getting  
*way* too old for this.

Dunadd reveals no emotion,  
standing as witness  
to the times that were,  
yet promising nothing  
to a future generation.

Scone has no call on this land,  
but owes a debt of birth.

Whatever was  
is no more here;  
whatever happened  
is now forgotten;  
and whoever lived  
has long since departed.

Sat on the rock  
toward sunrise,  
enthroned with the kings of old,  
how often the warrior kings  
looked over this landscape,  
regarded it as home.

And, as the warming comes,  
I see new birth,  
privileged as I am to perceive  
the glowing light  
of the first rays  
of returning westward glory.



## **FEATHERED WILD**

Whistling wind  
awakes the ears.

My eyes, glued in sleep,  
struggle with light,  
squint at dawn.  
Body, weary with night,  
pulled by arms groping for the sill  
to witness sound.

Curtains part  
like angels' wings,  
reveal the glory,  
beholding the form now landed,  
shuffling its wings, pecking the earth.

And, though I toil  
through humid sweat,  
the day seems easy,  
pleasant.

Time speeds on.  
Feathered Wild  
an ever present,  
announcing concern  
whenever close.

Dusk now,  
the stirring of feathers,  
primaries clap  
catching air beneath extended wings.  
And all too quickly,  
Feathered Wild is gone.

I glimpse the tail  
as overhead it spreads its frame  
and flies,  
toward the west,  
away come morn.

Solitude returns.  
An emptiness of sound  
more deafening by the absence  
of departed wings.

And, since a breath  
serenity disturbed,  
I turn to watch the skies  
once more and wait,  
to hear the cry  
of Feathered Wild return.

## ARYAH

Aryah  
walks in light  
but stalks the shadows.

The tattooed throng  
hide themselves from light,  
from the prowling lion  
who seeks any that would follow.

The shrines of the deepest woods  
that hide the incense  
burnt to familiar loves,  
suck the life,  
consume the hope,  
of a world lying within reach  
of all who stand  
at the clearing's edge.

Pulling back,  
the darkness draws to itself  
those barely escaped  
from the lie.

But Aryah  
walks in light  
and stalks the shadows.

His is not the war  
but peace,  
reconciling the painted faces  
of the brave  
into the world of tranquillity.

## THE BURN AT ARLE

I

Listen.  
Listen to the sound,  
the gushing of water  
down in the valley.

The blackness of the abyss  
reveals a thousand voices  
speaking in time,  
gurgling as the stream  
surges onward  
to the sea.

Their voice indistinct,  
uniting as they do  
with discordant harmony.

Voices raised  
are swallowed  
amidst the gurgling  
of the masses  
until, all too quickly,  
confusion bears her sons,  
wandering aimlessly  
with neither purpose  
nor plan.

But the single sound,  
the one true Voice,  
is discernible still  
in the babble.

## II

Hear.

Open your ears to the sound,  
the bubbling of water  
down in the burn.

Voices coalesce,  
chaotic order,  
foolish wisdom  
that demands to be heard  
but that brings no peace,  
flowing with  
inaudible clarity.

Words in time  
flow onward  
to the sea of infinity,  
that consumes  
thought and reason,  
eddies muddying  
the pure water  
with brown slimy sludge.

No single source here,  
no special brook.

As the sea swallows  
the vein,  
identity is lost  
in the vastness  
of  
nothingness.

### III

Look.  
Look for the sound,  
the gurgling of water  
down in the brook.

The one true Voice speaks  
in the babble  
of multitudes.

Once the Voice passes,  
it is no more,  
replaced by those  
who follow its path.  
It cannot return,  
lives only as memory  
to those who trail after.

What has been spoken  
is what will be said,  
but devoid is the life  
that walks not the words.

Reality is much more than speech,  
more than a recounting  
of that which has passed.

Reality walks in hand  
with experience,  
it beats in time with life,  
with purpose.

The Voice  
calls to  
action.



**GO!**

Go!  
Plant your foot  
in the hollow  
of Dunadd,  
where the kings of old  
stood over people  
accepting the throne.

Do you think you  
stand as one?  
That upon you  
will come  
the authority  
of kings long dead?

Go!  
Walk the paths of  
ancient men,  
traversing the hills  
and farming the plains,  
crofting your way  
to survive the cold.

Will you inherit  
their steel?  
Or their life  
be present,  
beating within  
your breast?

That which died  
has no rebirth,  
from the ashes  
of former men,  
dirt is all that comes.

But know the glory  
*they* knew,  
and touch the life  
*they* found.

For then, in part,  
you'll find  
the power coursing  
through your veins,  
as rivers  
flood the streams.

Methods do not glean  
the substance  
of former days.  
Neither good intentions,  
nor godly routine  
ever recaptures the past.

A moment is gone  
as time marches on,  
but from the one true Source  
comes Life.



## MARBLE QUARRY

They turn right.

We turn left.

We avoid the shops, the Abbey (where a friend left his walking stick two years running so that we decided it had to be 'wood magnetic' - and may even be the Pole), the derelict Nunnery, the ice cream seller (that my wife assures me, we *will* return to, if I behave myself).

But, most of all, we avoid the tourist.

As I said, they turn right, we turn left.

Along the old straight track, past the Corncrake beds where, heard but never seen, the male rasps out his call, into the Bay with its Back to the Ocean.

We may stop here for a few minutes, grab a cup of tea from our rucksacks and a muesli bar. It's no more than a ritual. But we're off almost as soon as we arrive, the destination beckons and I'm impatient - always so - until we get there.

Up the path to the loch - one of the most tiring of all the paths with it's boulders jutting from the surface - and down onto the pebble beach where someone, always someone, has raised a large pile of stones as if marking a grave.

Perhaps it is? Perhaps, one day, an archaeologist will come and muse upon the burial customs of twenty-first century man.

Then up and over a crest and into the Quarry.

There are easier places to get to but few that are as rewarding.

For here, in the midst of the rusting hardware, there's an echo of former times, a shadow of a people who once came to earn an existence but who had to scar the landscape to do it.

The silence hangs thick here, no tourist to giggle and point, to discuss where they want to have an evening meal - just the natural silence, a fitting reverence to lives gone by.

Though we'll spend a couple of hours here, I'm never sure why - there's no pinball for one, and I'm certain the watery edge was designed for pinball. It had to be.

We'll stumble our way across the large marble blocks till we find a dry ledge where we can sit and eat, stare into the sea, across the sound to Erraid.

But always, behind us, the reminder.

The reminder that we're palpably touching history, that the drill holes for the blast were once used to drive a crack down the seam, to loosen the rock from its bed, the air filling with smoke and dust, the workmen running for cover when dislodged marble unexpectedly fell.

They would have baulked that, one day, their livelihood would be a tourist destination. Or, perhaps, they would have stood with pride that their work would be long remembered even when their names were nothing more than a faint memory in the minds of their families, a 'grandfather quarryman'.

And everywhere their work resides, each house that has some small trinket made with the sweat of their faces, their voice lives on that in them, we live. Their hard work is the foundation upon which this modern day ease has come.

Every abandoned croft I visit, I get the same sense of loss, that time has chosen to forget the people and their ways, as if evolution deigned that such a breed was destined to be extinct.

But just a few fossilised bones to remind us of our past, to warn us that, as they are, so are we - that we may think ourselves immune but, we, too, will leave our mark and die, known only by the skeletal remains of living.

One small slither of Iona Marble sits on our shelf at home to remind of the place, to remind that we should never take for granted the voice of the past, the people from whom we came and to where, eventually, on this earth, our lives will go.

For a shadow is all that awaits us here, a life that's seen by the scars we leave upon the landscape in which we live.



## 38,410

I counted the fruit of the ripening beech,  
I marked them all down in my notebook with pen.  
And when, towards sunset, the total I'd reached:  
Thirty-eight thousand four hundred and ten.

Digging the cairn, removing the cone,  
We counted the rocks handled by ancient men.  
And when we'd arrived at the foundation stone:  
Thirty-eight thousand four hundred and ten.

The harvest of nature develops so fast,  
Though a couple of months and the memory's gone.  
But the work of the ancients in ages now past  
Will remember the people down centuries long.

Fleeting are nature's vast treasures to give,  
They're here for a day, then eternity gone.  
But better, by far, is how man may live,  
That one life may touch a whole people unborn.



## ARDNACROSS

How often the folk  
would gather here,  
their comings and goings  
to watch the stars,  
the lengthening days  
and the advent  
of the cycle's freeze.

How often the people  
would gather here  
on harvest days,  
the reaping spent,  
the wild boar killed  
to feed the village,  
to mark the day.

How often those  
who'd cracked the seam  
and levered the rock,  
who'd rolled the slab  
and raised it high,  
stood and wondered  
at the grainy face.

And some may call them fathers  
while they might call us sons,  
but what they lived, beginning,  
concludes in ages come.

How often the folk  
will climb the hill  
to see the stones  
that fathers raised,  
that ancients used  
to mark the day  
and read the sun.

How often the people  
will walk the ridge  
and marvel the feat  
that cracked the seam  
and moved the stone,  
taking the picture  
for friends back home.

How often those  
who caress the rock,  
who hate the blood  
but hunger meat,  
who forget the cost,  
think food is cheap  
and lacking sacrifice.

And we *may* call them fathers  
while they'd disown as sons  
the bastard kids upon whose hands  
the end of the age has come.



## SENSORY

Blinding light  
squinting the eyes,  
creasing the face.

Wind  
whipping the hair,  
punching the frame,  
chilling the skin.

The ground  
boggy, uneven,  
puddles to be avoided  
or fallen in to.

I choose the latter option  
all too often.

A typical Mull day  
if ever there was one,  
walking over Dervaig,  
above the hairpins.

In through the gate,  
mesh and timber,  
clattering behind  
like a collapsing hen house.

And in to the wood.

Silence.  
A slight rustle of wind  
through the leaves,  
but the change is stark.

Dusk descends,  
the myriad of leaves  
hiding the sun from view.



And the ground is even,  
damp but not waterlogged,  
a vague mist hanging  
in the air.

Suddenly,  
Kilmore stones appear  
as the eyes  
open to the darkness  
and I hear the sound  
of my own breath  
course against the throat.

Such a sensory change,  
a feeling of awe that,  
if I didn't know any better,  
I'd swear this was  
a holy place.



## THE PRAYER AT MOINE MHOR

(pronounced 'Moyn-ya Vore')

On such a morn, still breeze, I beg the waters peace  
This coracle at sea not flounder on the moss and cease.  
Onward, onward craft, the hope of brothers *í*,  
That satan's spirits set to flight, that from Your presence flee.

The rising smoke that from the summit plumes in single file from earth  
Onward guides our craft to plea from *í* that mission start to birth.  
Still the water, turning tide, and we, Your servants, use  
That God's right hand might guide this craft by Holy Goose.

Rippling sea, the whirling splash of oars that eddy above the breath  
Show tension in the heart that might the king show death.  
Grant Your servants, favour us, good Lord, with peace  
Returning soon, this watery path, we might be granted *í*.

Warriors see, no colours flown, just sackcloth loosely worn.  
Columba gazes back, his eyes of fire, from commission born,  
Conall, grant the island Dove to this brave Donegal son,  
O Holy Goose, be here upon Thy king, that *í* be wholly won.

Returning now, to *í* they sail, granted soil on which to serve,  
The Word to go from isle to glen, from loch to hill, that Light preserve.  
Though darkness come, the Goose will fly, alighting on far Pictish shore.  
Columba's gift, God's favoured will, won at the still waters of Moine Mhor.



## DALRIADA

They said I was mad  
to call the cat  
'Dalriada'.

As if this streak of fur  
could represent  
that ancient Celtic Kingdom.

But they've not seen her look  
at the grass tuft raised before her,  
as she bats it down  
with a friendless paw.

They've not seen her eye the deer  
that stumbles on to the farthest land,  
expressing permission  
through her lack of purpose  
to chase it away.

The cat reigns here,  
over land that's forever neutral.

And one day, perhaps,  
the Cat may hold sway  
over kingdoms  
that have yet to be.



## IT'S A SIGN

At six o'clock on the sixth of the sixth, on a number six I caught a ride  
To a greyhound track where in race six, the six dog in the Betting Guide  
was 'Sixty-Six' at six-to-one,  
And so six quid I placed upon.

'A sign from Heaven,' someone said, 'It seems that God is breaking through.  
Coincidence is not by chance, His hand's revealing something true.'  
But out the traps and round the grass,  
It finished sixth, completely last.

Where to go on holiday? I think we may go back to Mull.  
Then Mull is mentioned on the news and documentaries deal with gulls  
and wildlife on the Scottish Isle  
Coincidence? It makes me smile.

And when we drive across the Clyde, Mull is there on the roadside plaque  
'A sign!' I cry and to it point but my dear wife just stares me back.  
'That ain't no sign to confirm our goal,  
It's just a board from Traffic Control.'

Looking for confirming signs when we're so sure our action plan  
May confirm the true design, for God communicates with man.  
But, if the signs dictate our course,  
We're being driven by unknown source.



## CIST

Lay him low.

Cold stone sides  
make hollow the earth,  
provide the space  
for his final rest.

Bowl for food,  
band of jet,  
placed carefully  
from the living  
amongst the dead.

And schist to seal  
the kernel sown,  
to cover the fruit  
that from dust came  
and to dust goes.

Slumber the dream  
of immortality,  
my lord,  
until the day,  
dawning on this earth,  
will raise the seed.

How quaint the customs of the old  
Gathered as sheep in to death's fold.  
Capstone seals the ancient belief  
Of eternal joy from temporal grief.

And we,  
denying life from death  
in mortal frame,  
while we have breath  
would, after death,  
too late to hold,  
testify on headstones cold  
a hope in a resurrection of the soul  
when no escape from death's repose.



### **RAM'S HORN**

Take the horn, up to the highest place,  
to the mountain where My name was known  
centuries ago when darkness reigned.

Blow it loud, announce the trouble  
brought upon this place, upon a people  
who've heard Me speak and yet hold back.

Warn them, before it comes to pass,  
announce the army advancing north,  
sweeping before it all who stand.

'Shall I do that now?' I asked,  
He said, 'The time is coming, don't delay.'

Take the ram's horn to the hill,  
and let My people know  
that on this nation comes  
a time when none shall stand.

Though many of your men see light,  
prepare for days of darkest night.  
Tribulation, bleak and stark,  
wounds this land with deepest scar.

'Is this for now?' I said,  
He answered, 'Let My people know.'

But tell it not east, toward the sun.  
Neither proclaim it loudly in their streets,  
lest the daughters of the oppressor rejoice,  
overflowing with merriment and mirth.

Take the shophar, call upon Me now,  
for even in this darkness, light may shine,  
of hope from helplessness,  
of mercy where there's death.

Call upon Me now, My people,  
put the ram's horn to your mouth.  
Announce what comes amongst you,  
proclaim the times before they come,  
that many may see  
and hear  
and fear  
and turn to Me for healing.



## KILLIECHRONAN

### *Rabbits*

Outside the window  
seen past the blinds.

### *Pony*

A mare wanders by,  
stares in at breakfast,  
blowing her breath,  
twitching her ear.  
You had the last carrot  
yesterday evening,  
there won't be another  
til more tourists appear.

### *Wings*

Rushing outside,  
we stare at the feathers,  
soaring above,  
circling high.  
It's only a buzzard,  
no need to panic,  
distinctive in flight,  
uniquely they fly.

### *Pony*

I must disregard  
the stare of that pony  
she's really convinced  
I've a carrot inside.

### *Sparrows*

They fly back and forth,  
gathering the seed  
we leave on the sill,  
feeding the young.  
Fledglings in threes  
sit quietly still,  
waiting for mother  
when her errand is run.

It's gonna be hard  
leaving this year...